

Elections and the Republic

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In 921 AD, officials of Parantaka Chola I formulated an electoral policy for Uttamerur-caturvedi-mangalam, which was inscribed on its temple wall. Every year Uttamerur would elect five Committees – Annual, Garden, Tank Committee, Panchavar and Gold.

Uttamerur was divided into 30 wards and from those living in these wards any male possessing five qualifications would qualify for selection: he must (1) own more than quarter of velli (six acres) of taxpaying land, (2) live in house built on his own land, (3) be aged between 35 and 70 years, (4) know the Mantrabrahmana and (5) have learnt one Veda and one of the four bhasyas, even if he owns only one-eighth of a velli.

Further, the person should: (1) be well conversant with business and virtuous and (2) have made an honest living, (3) have a pure mind and (4) not have been on the Committees for the previous three years. Since Uttamerur was a Brahmin village, the candidate was expected to know some religious texts and a subjective judgment of purity was involved.

In other Chola non-Brahmin villages, similar codes existed without the emphasis on religious knowledge and purity. Apart from the positive requirements, there were disqualifications! Ineligible were those who have (1) as Committee member not submitted accounts, (2) committed incest or any of the “first four of the five great sins”, (3) been foolhardy, (5) stolen other’s property, (6) eaten forbidden food, (7) have committed sins even though they may have performed expiatory ceremonies.

What is even more drastic is that these disqualifications extended to the disqualified man’s relations, including: (1) sons of his mother’s sisters, (2) sons of his paternal aunt and maternal uncle, (3) natural brother of his mother, (4) natural brother of his father, (5) his brother, (6) his father-in-law, (7) natural brother of his wife, (8) husband of his natural sister, (9) sons of his natural sister, (10) his son-in-law and (11) his father. Imagine how many current political families would be eligible on these criteria!

The selection consisted of qualified names written on chits into a pot which were then picked out by a young boy before a full meeting of the “Great Assembly” - one name for each ward for the three Committees.

If any member had been found guilty of an offense, he was to be removed at once and fresh members selected. For the Panchavara and the Gold Committees, the 30 members needed would be drawn after merging the eligible from all the 30 wards together. Those wards from which members were selected for these Committees in one year would not be eligible to be represented the next year. There is also reference to a “Supervision of Justice” Committee.

Uttarmerur was not unique. The earliest evidence of a similar system is indicated by a Pandyan inscription of 782 AD. The system devised 1200 years ago was prevalent throughout southern India under the Pandyans, Cholas and the Vijayanagar Empire. How and why it decayed is not documented. Nor is there much awareness in recent times of what our ancestors did to make sure that they were ruled well and had taken the proper precautions to assure good governance by electing good governors.

The First Republic – with all its electoral rolls, electronic voting machines, opinion polls, media attention and Election Commission, etc – seems to result in less qualified and more disqualifiable elected representatives per the Chola system. An alarmingly large proportion of our Members of Parliament (30% in the Lok Sabha and 19% in the Rajya Sabha) and Legislative Assemblies (AP 11%, Karnataka 14%, Tamil Nadu 30%, UP 35% and Bihar 48%) have criminal records and are awaiting trial for the charges against them in the courts. This proportion has been increasing over time.

Nothing good can be expected from this tendency. Political parties now rely on their candidate’s own resources – money, muscle and other strengths – to win elections. Consequently, the central leaderships of the parties are willing hostages to those who can manipulate and corrupt the electoral process and are in no position to discipline them.

In this situation, the legitimacy of politicians and political parties is being lost. When it is, our democracy will no longer be worth defending. For what is important to the average citizen is not so much elections as such but credible, honest and effective governance it should bring.

Given the incapacities of the electorate – still acting de facto as subjects despite their de jure status as citizens – not much can be expected of them unless their capacities for citizenship are built up by provision of literacy, education and economic security. This incapacity has been convenient for the First Republic as it allows for manipulation of the electorate without being accountable to it.

Ultimately, it is the electorate that needs to be wise, discriminating and selective. But the first target should be reform of elected representation. Unless politicians are reformed, the resources and efforts to build citizen’s capacities will not be committed by the political system. When the First Republic degenerates to the extent that it acts against the liberties of the people and exploits them, it becomes dysfunctional and needs to be redesigned.

In the Second Republic, the first change will need to be reform of the political parties and the way they select candidates, finance and conduct elections and exercise power. Such a reform requires strict qualifications and disqualification for candidates for elective offices.

It also needs State funding of political parties - and not just election expenses. This annual funding, mandated by Parliament and disbursed by the Election Commission of India, could be based on a formula based on the number of party members. Another element could additionally be based on votes polled by the party in the previous election.

This would strengthen immeasurably the top party leadership. A polity does not come cheap - the question is only whether it will come from legitimate or illegitimate funding. That will decide whether the polity will be honest or corrupt, effective or selfish, accountable or arbitrary. In order to be eligible for State funding, political parties would have to:

1. Maintain membership rolls and collect common annual membership fees and have them audited by independent auditors appointed by the Election Commission.
2. Have annual elections of the top leadership by the entire membership.
3. Select candidates as per strict qualifications and disqualifications.
4. Have party-candidates elected by the relevant constituency membership.
5. File election expenses for audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India.
6. Any violation of any of the above conditions will result not only in stoppage of funding but also of de-recognition of the party.

In the Second Republic, a new polity, clean and stable, will have to rise out of the mistakes and grossness of the First Republic to be able to fulfill the hopes of a billion and ensure that the country achieves its true potential and stability.

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